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by Andrew Rasiulis
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COMMENTARY

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On May 20, Volodymyr Zelinskiy was inaugurated president of Ukraine after his remarkable landslide victory against the incumbent Petro Poroshenko. Zelinskiy's inauguration speech was remarkable for what it said and for what it did not say. The Ukrainian electorate demanded change from the encrusted old guard of Ukrainian politics who have ruled Ukraine since the 1991 collapse of the USSR. Day one of Zelinskiy's term suggests that a new era in Ukrainian politics has indeed arrived.

Zelinskiy did not say anything about joining NATO or the EU. What he did say was that his top priority is to open negotiations with Russia and to bring peace to the Donbass. This is consistent with the brief statements on policy he made during the presidential election campaign and is a clear break from the status quo, or stalemate policy that was the hallmark of the Poroshenko administration.

Poroshenko's campaign slogan was "Army. Language. Faith." "Army" represented the policy of facing down the Russians over the conflict in the Donbass and the Russian seizure of Crimea. It was centred on the intent to join NATO and the EU while conducting a holding action in the Donbass against the Russian-backed rebels and using naval assets to challenge Russian control of the Kerch Strait off Crimea. "Language" was the policy to make Ukrainian the only official working language of Ukraine, which some Ukrainian Russian-language speakers perceived negatively. "Faith" was the policy to break off the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Moscow Patriarchate to which it had been joined since 1686 –essentially, a policy plank of Ukrainian nationalism.

By contrast, Zelinskiy's speech has clearly established the following policy priorities:

1. Bring peace to the Donbass without losing Ukrainian territory;
2. Exchange captives;
3. Respect the Russian-speaking Ukrainians and always to consider them as Ukrainian citizens; and
4. Pass legislation in the Rada to cancel lawmakers' immunity from prosecution within two months of his taking office (part of his anti-corruption policy).

On the last point, the two-month deadline is commensurate with Zelinskiy's declaration to dissolve the Rada and to call for snap elections within two months, likely late July.

In making these policy points, Zelinskiy chose to use specific countries as examples for Ukraine to follow. Specifically, they were:

Switzerland, as the Swiss are an example of living on friendly terms among themselves and their neighbours. This model suggests a policy of reconciliation with Ukrainians in the Donbass, respect for bilingualism, possible federalism and possible neutrality between Eastern and Western Europe. These points are key to moving forward on the stalled Minsk 2 ceasefire



settlement for the Donbass agreed to in February 2015 between Ukraine, Russia and the Donbass rebels.

Israel was named as an example of creating strong self-defence forces for Ukraine (in contrast to the usual NATO backdrop), and Japan as a model of a technologically advanced economy. Iceland was noted as an example of excellence in football (soccer).

As part of moving forward with his new policy agenda, Zelinskiy called for the dismissals of Prosecutor General Yuriy Lutsenko, Defence Minister Stepan Poltorak and Vasyl Hrytsak, head of the Security Service of Ukraine. Poltorak and Hrytsak submitted their resignations soon after the inauguration speech, and Lutsenko has recently followed suit.

The Russian reaction to the call for a peaceful settlement of the Donbass conflict has been cautious. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has urged Zelinskiy to move forward on implementing the Minsk agreement. President Vladimir Putin's spokesman has stated that Putin will congratulate Zelinskiy upon becoming president of Ukraine only after there is some measure of progress in securing peace in the Donbass.

The Minsk process has been stalled largely due to the Ukrainian side's unwillingness to move forward on the agreement to pass legislation to grant the Donbass special federal status within Ukraine, including Russian-language rights. As for the Russian side, it refuses to pull back its support for the Donbass rebels and to allow Ukrainian forces to re-establish control over the border between the Donbass and Russia until the Ukrainian government passes such legislation.

A new page in Ukrainian politics has been turned and the forthcoming Rada elections will play a critical role in securing the course Zelinskiy outlined in his inaugural speech.

▶ **About the Author**

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► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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